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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the nature of revision in lyric poetry, a study investigated poets' writing processes. Primary data sources included poets' commentary, letters, recorded conversations, interviews, and essays. Two case studies were also conducted--an evaluation of two poets at work (one a novice and one an experienced poet) and a textual analysis of six poets' working papers. These data were examined in relation to current composing theory. Results suggested that the current perspective on revision is incomplete. In terms of text development, findings indicated that conventionally used systems for describing transactional texts were inadequate for describing revisions made to lyric poems. However, the major finding involved the area of cognition. While transactional writers may be described as revising either internally (for oneself) or externally (for a reader), the investigation revealed a third such process--aesthetic revising. In this case, a text is reworked for poetic purposes. The results suggest that artistic abilities underlie this process and allow poets to detach themselves from either self-expressive or communicative purposes. The results also suggest that aesthetic revising probably exists to varying degrees in other genres. (JD)

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TRACKING THE MUSE: THE WRITING PROCESSES OF POETS

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ABSTRACT

This study describes one dimension (the nature of revision in lyric poetry) of the first, large-scale investigation into poets' writing processes. Available documents comprised the primary data source: poets' commentary on their processes in poems, letters, recorded conversations, interviews and essays; and researchers commentary in manuscript studies, lyric genre studies, and appropriate creative process and composing process studies. In addition, the researcher conducted two case studies of poets-at-work and textual analysis of six poets' working papers. The investigation used a descriptive methodology evaluating the data for its degree of usefulness and then examining it in relation to current composing theory.

The study suggests that our present view of revision is incomplete. In terms of text development, the study found that systems for categorizing revisions that are conventionally used to describe transactional texts are inadequate for describing revisions made to lyric poems. The major finding is in the area of cognition. While transactional writers may be described as revising either internally, for oneself, or externally, for a reader (Murray 1978), the investigation revealed a third process in revision, aesthetic revising, by which a text is reworked for poetic purposes, for the text. The competencies that underlie this process seem to be artistic abilities that allow poets to detach themselves from either self-expressive or communicative purposes.

Significant implications are suggested by this study for composing research, for along the discourse continuum, poetic processes are likely to be operative to varying degrees in other genres. The study calls for attention to be given to the poetic element in the process of revision.

Background

During the past fifteen years, composition research has made enormous progress toward describing the mental processes writers engage in to produce text. Yet what we know about the writing process is based on research into a narrow range of discourse. Nearly all composing process studies have investigated transactional writing, usually impromptu essays assigned by researchers themselves (e.g., Perl, 1979; Rose, 1980; Flower and Hayes, 1981; Matsushashi, 1980); only five studies have included poetry or poets (Emig, 1971; Mischel, 1974; Schwartz, 1983; Blau, 1983; Shanahan, 1985). Discourse theorists (Moffett, 1968; Kinneavy, 1971; Britton, 1975) have elaborated differences among kinds of writing, but these differences have not been exploited by investigators in designing models of writing processes. Such models are likely to be discourse specific since they are based on the behaviors of writers composing specific kinds of transactional texts, yet they are presented as models of a generalized writing process (as in Flower and Hayes' model, 1981).

Composing process research and discourse theory have not worked together as closely as we might imagine and a number of questions have not yet been explored. Are there differences between transactional and poetic writing processes? Are writing problems discourse specific? Is there generic variation in the development of writing abilities? Can we identify differences and similarities in the writing processes of "creative" versus "expository" writers that will help us as we design writing programs? Interest in such questions prompted me to undertake a large-scale investigation into poets' writing processes which, as a first composition study focusing on non-transactional discourse, might extend the field's range of knowledge about composing.

Method

Poetry seems to be uniquely ill-suited for the kinds of experimental writing situations created by researchers investigating other forms. Lyric poetry is

almost never written on assignment, and as my interest was in poetry as it is produced under usual circumstances, in self-initiated poetry writing, an experimental design would have been doubly inappropriate. I chose instead a descriptive methodology like the one suggested by Gabriel Della-Piana (1978) to facilitate the broadest possible look at poets' processes and to begin providing a theoretical framework for further research.

...a methodological plurality is needed for studying poetry revision, methods that are...sensitive to the complexity of the revision process ...that will focus initially on generating hypotheses rather than on testing them, and on identifying critical variables rather than manipulating them. Thus, descriptive studies will be more valuable than formal experiments. (p.111)

The present study is based on the collection and analysis of data from multiple sources. The primary data sources were available documents: poets' commentary on their processes in poems, letters, recorded conversations and interviews; prose works by poets on the writing of specific poems, on poetry writing in general and on teaching creative writing; and researchers commentary in manuscript studies, lyric genre studies, and creative process and composing process studies that have included poetry or poets. I have also used two supplementary data sources: case studies I conducted of a novice and an experienced poet and text analysis of working papers from six poets.

I measured the usefulness of the data according to the genre of discourse to which it belonged. Since types of discourse are distinguished according to differences in writers' superordinate purposes and differences in audience, my evaluation scale placed as the data most appropriate for understanding poets' processes, those genres in which the writer's purpose is closest to that of examining the writing process.

Poets' Commentary

Poems

including authors' notes

Extemporaneous Statements

in interviews, conversations, private letters

Prose Works

on the writing of specific poems; on writing poetry; on teaching creative writing

Researchers' Commentary

Literary

manuscript studies; lyric genre studies

Creative Process

studies which include poets or poetry

Composing Process

studies which include poets or poetry

Available Data on Poets' Processes

In analyzing the data, poems became the least weighted source and composing studies the most weighted. This did not mean, for example, that interesting observations about writing processes were not found in poems about poetry, but that the usefulness of such information needed to be measured against the demands on the poet for writing a poem, demands that might supercede those of exposition. Similarly, in evaluating information gathered from an interview, it was necessary to consider the extemporaneous, public nature of interviews which might result in a less precise explanation of writing processes than, for example those found in essays about the writing of individual poems. In the case of revision, manuscript evidence became particularly important.

After evaluating the data's usefulness, I examined it in relation to current composing theory. As a result, I located features of poetry writing that appear to be inconsistent with the dimensions of composing and revising that

to a discussion of poets' processes because it allows us to make broad but interesting observations about the nature of poetry revising; the second because it seems to be inapplicable to poetry.

The method Sommers used comes from Chomsky's categories of grammatical transformations: deletion, addition, substitution and rearrangement. These categories are so broad that they seem to be applicable to any genre of writing and, in fact, might be used to classify revision made to visual works of art or musical compositions as well.

Looking at poetry manuscripts for examples of these four kinds of revising moves I found evidence of at least two patterns. The most striking is the preponderance of revision by deletion, as opposed to revision by addition. Lyric poems seem to be written through a process of tightening rather than of elaboration. Poets seem to draft freely and then to refine what they have drafted. Naturally such broad generalizations cannot hold for all poets writing all of their poems. W. D. Snodgrass, for example, describes his process as proceeding from a short draft to a longer one: "When one of my poems goes bad I almost always have to go back and write it longer, develop openly and extensively ideas which I have been trying to imply intensively." (1975 p.23)

Nevertheless, all of the poems in my collection of drafts from six California poets, all the poems by the professional poet in the case study I conducted, as well as much evidence in the manuscript collections of the Lockwood Memorial Library at the University of Buffalo (Arnheim, 1948) and Alberta Turner's (1977) collection of drafts of poems from fifty contemporary poets allow even a casual observer to see poets revising by a process primarily of deletion and tightening.

In free verse this refining process is more apparent than it is in traditional verse. A poet writing in free verse most often produces early drafts that are much larger than the final version. In traditional verse, while deletion seems to be more significant than addition, a second pattern is evident. Sub-

researchers have identified so far.

In this essay I will discuss one area of my study: poets' revising processes. Since categories of discourse are not discrete but occur on a continuum, poets' revising behaviors may, to a lesser degree, exist for writers of transactional discourse as well. By providing a description of revising for poetry, this study attempts to illuminate the poetic dimension of the writing process.

Defining Revision

As one of very few fields that can be criticized for not having enough of its own jargon, the field of composition uses revising, like the word, composing, to stand for several different aspects of writing at once. First, revision identifies both a mental process and the actual changes made to a text. Second, the term designates a subprocess of composing, and is itself an overall process that includes editing as a subprocess. Finally, some researchers, like Donald Murray (1978) call revision everything a writer does after completing a first draft, while others, like Flower and Hayes (1981) consider revision to be the changes made during a first draft.

All of these definitions of revising may be classified within the categories of "kinds of revisions to a text" or "kinds of mental processes or attitudes during revising," but, of course, textual development and cognitive activity occur simultaneously. Any time one takes apart writing to look at it, the picture one creates is necessarily fragmentary and to some extent, artificial.

Kinds of Revising Moves

Two classification systems are currently used by composition theorists to identify kinds of revisions: an older, less complex system that Nancy Sommers (1980) uses to describe differences between the revising behaviors of professional and student writers, and a more sophisticated adaptation of this system by Lester Faigley and Stephen Witte (1981) that attempts to classify revisions by whether or not a change affects the meaning of the work. The first system is valuable

stitution seems to be the most recurrent revising move.

Traditional verse may allow for a more efficient kind of mental revising to take place before words are committed to paper. That is, the verse form itself may serve as a scaffold on which the poet builds the words of the poem, so that early drafts of traditional forms are often composed in the same format as the finished draft: a complete sonnet, villanelle, etc. In free verse, the form is literally shaped during the process of revising.

This first classification system does not distinguish among revisions that have greater and lesser effect on a whole work. Faigley and Witte's system attempts to separate revisions that change the meaning of a text from those that leave meaning intact. However, Faigley and Witte's system of analysis does not seem applicable for poetry revising. If we look at the reasons why this is the case, we may locate some of the features of revising that are unique to poetry.

Faigley and Witte analyze revisions for "whether new information is brought to the text or whether old information is removed in such a way that it cannot be recovered through drawing inferences." (p.402) In this way they are able to identify "formal changes" and "meaning-preserving changes" that affect only the surface of a text, as distinct from "text-base changes" that alter a work's meaning. Included in the first group are changes of punctuation, tense and format.

Such a classification system will need to be modified, if it can be made applicable at all, for poetry writing. It seems to be easier to locate the "surface" of a text in transactional discourse than in poetry. Revisions of punctuation may change the meaning of a poem; changes of format certainly do.

Donald Hall cites a telling example of the effect of punctuation changes on poetry in his essay, "Robert Frost Corrupted." (1982) Hall laments the surface editorial changes in Lathem's edition, The Poetry of Robert Frost.

Frost wrote the line: The woods are lovely, dark and deep

We do not find this line in The Poetry of Robert Frost; instead we find: The woods are lovely, dark, and deep.

To say that the woods are 1) lovely, 2) dark, and 3) deep differs considerably from claiming that they are lovely in that they are dark and deep. In Frost's line, the general adjective lovely is explained by the more particular modifiers dark and deep. In the editor's line, the egalitarian threesome is non-parallel -- as if we proclaimed that a farmer grew apples, McIntoshes, and Northern Spies. (p.141)

The change of meaning Hall identifies would occur even if the line appeared in a prose work; but in a poem meaning is so compressed that a single comma may do the work of whole paragraphs of explanation we might find surrounding the line in a transactional text.

Revisions made to the "surface" words of a poem, for instance a substitution that replaces a word with one that is a synonym, but a synonym that rhymes with a word in another line, can be said to affect the meaning of the poem; for the rhymed words may now draw the reader's attention in a slightly different way, or, from an older (New Critical) perspective on meaning, the words may play off of each other differently than they would without the rhymes. Moreover, whether "information...can be recovered through drawing inferences" is more a matter of interpretation in poetic texts.

Although they do not identify it as such, Faigley and Witte's system is based on the analysis of transactional texts. Whether or not information can be recovered is determined by the kind of reading that Louise Rosenblatt (1979) calls "efferent," reading for what we will take away with us, what information or guidance for action. Texts can also be read "aesthetically." In aesthetic reading, which is the way we comprehend poetic texts, we read for what we can appreciate during the act of reading itself.

As Rosenblatt points out, any text can be read efferently or aesthetically; perhaps because of their focus on transactional texts Faigley and Witte ignore the possibility of aesthetic reading, the kind of reading that seems most essential to poetic discourse.

In a poem, information is intimately connected to aesthetic features. Moreover, information and meaning cannot be equated in discussing poetic discourse in the way that Faigley and Witte seem to equate them in their system of analysis. Even in transactional texts, as Marshal McLuhan would argue, meaning is probably more than the sum of its information. Highly lyrical texts such as some of Blake's or Shakespeare's songs may have very little informative content at all. Certainly, the meaning of the poem -- as indeterminate as reader response critics tells us meaning may be -- cannot be located if the text is read merely for information. New classification systems need to be developed that will accommodate the kinds of revising moves entailed in writing poetry.

Internal and External Revision

Murray's work provides a useful starting place for analysing the mental processes entailed in the various kinds of revising moves, both because his theory of revising is compatible with, and in a sense underlies, other researchers explanations of the process, and because the evidence he draws on comes primarily from the self-reports of poetic writers.

Murray's quotes from over fifty writers support his premise that writers discover what they have to say during the process of revising. This discovery process, however, seems to take place during only one of the two kinds of revision Murray identifies, internal revision.

Internal revision: Under this term, I include everything writers do to discover and develop what they have to say beginning with the reading of a completed first draft. They read to discover where their content, form, language, structure, and information

to find out what they have to say or hope to say. The audience is one person: the writer.

External revision: This is what writers do to communicate what they have found they have written to another audience. It is editing and proofreading and much more. Writers now pay attention to the conventions of form and language, mechanics and style.

They eye their audience and may choose to appeal to it. (p.91)

Differences between the two forms of revision derive in part from differences in audience -- internal revision is writing for oneself; external is for an outside audience. Murray proposes to investigate internal revision rather than external because he says the latter has already been explored. The writers he quotes discuss the process of discovery:

Adrienne Rich: Poems are like dreams; you put into them what you don't know you know.

Charles Simic: You never know when you begin a poem what it has in store for you.

William Stafford: I don't see writing as a communication of something already discovered, as "truths" already known. Rather, I see writing as a job of experiment. It's like any discovery job; you don't know what's going to happen until you try it. (p.103)

Most of the writers Murray quotes are poets or novelists. It is possible that if Murray had looked for evidence of external revision he would not have found nearly so much material from poetic writers. That is, while poets may be the most likely of all writers to describe writing as a discovery process and will therefore offer Murray rich data to support his concept of internal revision, they are probably the least likely of all writers to think of the next step in their process as one of communicating ideas to a reader. Certainly some poetry revising is undertaken with the reader in mind; but although the dichotomy

of internal and external revision seems accurate as a description of the process of writing essays, it does not seem adequate to account for poets' writing processes. The dimension of revision that is probably most critical for poets might be described as simultaneously internal and external. Poets, and perhaps to some extent writers in other forms, revise not only for themselves and for their readers but for the piece of writing itself. Such revising is external in that it is outside the writer in the poem, and is internal in that it is motivated by writer's conceptions of what they want their poems to be.

After carefully reviewing the reasons for revisions by poets writing narratives and epics as well as lyrics, Phyllis Bartlett (1951) concludes:

(the) sensible, skeletal view of poetic revision is focused on the poem itself, not on the impression the poet wants to make on the reader or on the possibility of the poet's changing his moral or aesthetic standards. This attitude, more than any other underlies the efforts of most poets in their revising (p.198)

Bartlett looks mostly at revisions made to finished poems; but her observations seem to hold for the process of finishing the first version of a poem as well, and her study is a valuable sourcebook of poets' commentary on their processes both of revising and habits of working. Bartlett includes this quotation from Allen Tate on revisions he made to one of his poems:

The revisions were not undertaken for the convenience of the reader but for the poem's own clarity, so that word, phrase, line, passage, the poem might at worst come near its best expression. (p.198)

To adequately describe revising processes in poetry we may need a three-part rather than two-part model, one that accounts for revision "focused on the poem itself."

Aesthetic Revision

James Britton's definition of poetic discourse is that it uses "language as

an art medium. A piece of poetic writing is a verbal construct, an 'object' made out of language." (p.90) According to Britton, a basic difference between the poetic and the transactional is that while transactional writing attempts to persuade or to inform an audience, "poetic writing constitutes language that exists for its own sake and not as a means of achieving something else." (p.91)

To be able to revise a text "for its own sake" the writer must view the material in a special way. Murray is certainly correct that writers (of all forms) do not necessarily know what they mean before they discover and clarify their ideas through revising. But the process Murray describes: finding meaning during internal revision and communicating to a reader during external revision seems to trace the development of expressive into transactional rather than into poetic discourse. Poetic writers not only revise to discover what they know, but to uncover what the poem knows. The language of a poetic text is not so much a conveyer of meaning as it is the object of meaning, for Archibald MacLeish's dictum a poem "should not mean but be" holds not only for the particular form of poetry the Imagists preferred but as a description of the function of poetic discourse.

The poetic text exists as an object, like a painting, to which discursive meaning may be attributed. To understand the meaning of one's own poem, the poet must read the work as a poem. That is, rather than revising internally to discover what one wishes to say, or revising externally to convey information to a reader, the poet must do a third kind of revising, what can be called "aesthetic revising." In this kind of revising the writer's purpose is not to clarify or communicate one's ideas, or to merely express oneself as in expressive discourse, but to refine and develop a work of art. To do this the poet must begin to read the draft in the particular way that lyric poetry (or another genre) is read.

Britton calls transactional writing a means of "achieving something else" because of its informative and persuasive functions. The reader of a transactional

text must get the information; so at the farthest transactional end of the discourse continuum the language of the text is expected to be, in a sense, transparent. But poetic discourse is "gotten" by readers to the extent that they are able to appreciate the complexity of their experience of reading. The language of the poetic text is not transparent but calls attention to itself. The poetic functioning of language becomes most evident as we move toward the most poetic end of the continuum to lyric poetry. Since the poet must read the developing text as it evolves, and by reading, experience the text as a poem, it is not surprising that there are differences between the processes of reading during the revision of a poetic and a transactional text.

Reading During Revising

The process of reading literary texts is naturally a subject of intense interest for literary critics. One theory I have already mentioned that is particularly useful to the study of poets' revising processes is Louise Rosenblatt's "transactional theory of the literary work." Having observed the reading process closely, Rosenblatt acknowledges, like Britton, that kinds of discourse exist on a continuum rather than in discrete categories. While Britton's distinctions are based on differences in writers' purposes, Rosenblatts are based on differences in the nature of readers' interactions with texts. Interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, the two theories are neatly compatible.

Rosenblatt's two kinds of reading, efferent and aesthetic, account for the differences between the way we read transactional and poetic texts, respectively. Her description of how a reader "produced a poem" seems appropriate for describing a reader who is also the writer of the poem.

To produce a poem, the reader had to pay attention to the broader gamut of what these particular words in this particular order were calling forth within him: attention to the sound and rhythm of the imprints of past encounters with these words and their referents

in differing life and literary context, attention to the overtones of feeling, the chiming of sound, sense, idea, and association. Sensing, feeling, imagining, thinking under the stimulus of the words, the reader who adopts the aesthetic attitude feels no compulsion other than to apprehend what goes on during this process, to concentrate on the complex structure of experience that he is shaping and that becomes for him the poem...(p.26)

The reader who is also the writer of the text feels a "compulsion" not only to read and apprehend the text in the way Rosenblatt has outlined, but also to revise the text to make it "come near its best expression." Rosenblatt's characterization of reading helps clarify the nature of poets' revising processes for two reasons. These are so basic to the writing process they may be stated as maxims: 1. Writers are readers of their own texts. 2. One reads a poem differently from the way one reads other kinds of discourse. Poets are able to revise aesthetically, viewing the text as a poem rather than as information to be conveyed or discovered, because they read the text aesthetically, as a poem.

Since the subjects in Flower and Hayes' studies wrote drafts of essays rather than poems or stories, the kind of reading they used during revising may have been primarily efferent rather than aesthetic. Yet the cognitive process model Flower and Hayes developed does appear to allow for a variety of possible reading processes. The model uses the term "reviewing" to include the "evaluation" and "revision" of one's work. By calling this feature, reviewing, rather than simply "rereading" Flower and Hayes suggest that reading a text can take a number of forms. Writers can merely look through what they have written to get a general impression of their progress, or they may read for specific purposes such as those entailed in internal, external or aesthetic revising. Flower and Hayes point out that reviewing can be an automatic process triggered

spontaneously by looking at the page, or writers can consciously set out to review their work.

The special ways in which poets review their work led Della-Piana to propose a model particularly for poetry revising. What seems specific to poetry in Della-Piana's model is its emphasis on "what the work itself suggests." The feature of revision that Della-Piana identifies as "discrimination" allows the poet to "see what the work does or does not do, and see what the work itself suggests as to what it is about." (p.106)

To revise a text in this way, the poet must read the text aesthetically, as a poem, paying attention more to aesthetic features than to efferent ones. In doing so, poets move from discrimination toward the resolution of the poem in what Della-Piana calls the "tension" of the revision process.

Revising Ability

Della-Piana's term "tension" is a revealing one. Not only must poets identify what in the draft is incongruent with their earlier conception of their work, and at the same time scrutinize the draft for what the poem suggests it wants to become, poets must cope with a tension of uncertainty for as long as it takes to complete the poem to their satisfaction. They must resist the temptation to come to a too early closure on the process of revising.

Analyzing the ability of writers to persist in working during the tedious and often frustrating process of revising, Sheridan Blau (1985) identifies affective and cognitive dimensions of revising ability. The affective dimension, commitment, seems to describe writing ability in any genre. Commitment enables a writer to value the completion of a work and have "faith (despite feelings to the contrary) in one's capacity" to complete the task. (p.5)

The cognitive dimension, detachment, is the ability to distance oneself from a draft enough to be able to take another reader's perspective on it, and the ability to reflect critically on the ideas one has already expressed in a

draft enough to discover and refine what one wishes to say. These two features of detachment which Blau calls "empathy" and "diacritical thinking" appear to underlie external and internal revision respectively.

Detachment affects a poet's ability to revise, but in poetry writing detachment seems to be of a particular kind. Not only must poets be able to empathize with a reader and to think critically about ideas or expressions as they are developing in the draft, they must also be able to detach themselves from their own ideas enough to let the poem become, in a sense, autonomous. The essay writer appears to work either in internal revision drawing on the ability to think diacritically, or in external revision drawing on the ability to empathize with another reader. But the poet works also in aesthetic revision. During this kind of revising poets draw on their abilities to work as artists. They must detach themselves both from their own points of view and from their ideas expressed in the text so that they may revise the draft as a poem, drawing out the poem, as in internal revision, one draws out one's ideas. This kind of revision calls for an artistic detachment, an ability to stand back from the work in order to shape it as a poem.

Blau suggests that these abilities which underlie revising are developmental, that as one matures as a writer, one becomes a better reviser. Writers learn to empathize more completely with readers and to develop the habit of reflecting critically on their ideas. In the affective domain, it may be that we become accustomed to how difficult it is to write and therefore grow more able to have faith in our capacity to accomplish various writing tasks.

The particular kind of ability that underlies poetry revising, an artistic detachment that allows the poet to revise aesthetically, seems to be developmental as well. For, in the case studies I conducted, one of the most striking differences between the novice and the experienced poet is that the novice rarely moved into aesthetic revising; he was rarely able to achieve the sense of detach-

ment on a work that is familiar to experienced poets.

Conclusions and Implications for Further Research

This study found that in terms of text development, the systems of categorizing revisions that are conventionally used to describe transactional texts are inadequate for describing revisions made to lyric poems. Looking at cognition, the study found that the process of reading poetic texts aesthetically results in revising behaviors for poets that are neither "internal" nor "external" but that are "aesthetic." The competencies that underlie these behaviors appear to be artistic abilities of detachment that enable the poet to attend to the developing text not only as self-expression during internal revision, or as communication with an audience during external revision, but as a work of art during aesthetic revision.

The study suggests that our current view of revision is incomplete. By identifying aesthetic revision, the process by which a text is reworked for poetic purposes, the study begins to expand our picture of the nature of revision.

Having identified features of revision for a specific genre, the study has significant implications for composition research. If we can locate discourse specific features of revision, we will need to modify our descriptions of a generalized writing, or revising process.

The study does not indicate, however, that all writing behaviors are generically unique; rather, the poetic behaviors described in this study appear to be most clearly visible in the process of writing the most poetic form of discourse, the lyric poem. Along the discourse continuum poetic processes are likely to be operative to varying degrees in other genres. Further study both of poets' processes and of the poetic element in other forms of discourse are needed to begin to more adequately describe the process of revision.

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